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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the institutional accreditation process, focusing especially on how student assessment fits into accreditation. There are two important reasons for accreditation: first, student financial aid programs at all levels require accreditation; and second, public or private institutional funders require it as a standard of good practice. Accreditation is based on criteria that reflect best practices in education, and to that end accrediting agencies seek information on what the institution says it is doing; whether the institution has the resources to do what it says it is doing; how the institution demonstrates performance; whether the institution will be able to continue these practices; and whether the institution operates with integrity. The accrediting process itself has four steps: (1) an institutional self-study based on the above criteria; (2) evaluation by accrediting agencies of the self-study; (3) a written report by the accrediting agency; and (4) an appeal, should that be necessary. Within the accreditation process, special attention is given to assessment of student learning. For accreditation purposes, a student assessment program should have four components: an institutional mission statement; departmental goal statements; clearly stated course objectives; and continuous assessment, with results used to make appropriate changes. (CH)

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Assessing the Institution: The National Accreditation Perspective

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First let me open with a brief background statement. For the past six years I've been a consultant- evaluator for the regional accrediting association for the nineteen states of the Midwest, the North Central Association. During that time I've completed nine visits to Midwestern universities, mainly private universities. In three of these visits I've been the team chair - which means I coordinate the visit and write the final report. I've also completed three "paper reviews" - analyzing requests by institutions for approval of new degrees to determine if standards have been met. To maintain my position with the other NCA, I attend in-service programs each year at the annual Spring convention, and my work is evaluated by the team chair, the host institution and the NCA staff. Of course that means I read widely the literature on accreditation in all of its forms and I keep myself aware of what all six other regional accrediting agencies do or expect. Today, I do not speak for the North Central Association. But I will rely on my experience and my reading to present an overview of institutional accreditation, focusing especially on how assessment fits into accreditation. Dr. Foote will discuss specialized or program accreditation. So lets start.

It's obvious to you that all institutions need to be accredited. There are two important reasons for accreditation. The first is that student financial aid programs, at all levels - federal, state, local - require the institution a student attends to be accredited. In other words, students need to attend an accredited institution to be eligible for financial assistance provided by governments. The second is that institutional funders - public or private agencies which give grants - require accreditation as a sign the institution is operating in accord with the normal practice for American higher education institutions. So accreditation is a sort of "peer review process," based on standards of good practice.

Institutional accreditation means the whole institution (academic, student life, finances, services, institutional effectiveness, etc.) has been evaluated.

Institutional accreditation is based on a series of criteria which reflect the best practices in higher education. One of these practices, assessment of student learning or student outcomes is identified in the 1965 Higher Education Act, amended regularly but most recently in 1998, in Section 492, as a criteria expected for accreditation of higher education institutions. Since the six regional accrediting agencies are themselves approved as accreditors by the U.S. Department of Education, their criteria and standards must include assessment of student outcomes, including student learning.

The process of accrediting, or re-accrediting, an institution has some slight variations from region to region. Basically, though, the six regional accrediting agencies form their criteria and standards around five questions:

1. What does the institution say it is doing for its publics and its students?
2. Does the institution have the resources to do what it says it will do? Reference here is to factors which affect the process of education: programs, faculty, facilities, financial resources, administration, students.
3. How does the institution know - or show - that it is doing what it says it will do? This is the place for assessment of course. This is the way an institution documents that its students learn.
4. Is the institution likely to be able to continue to do what it says it will do?
5. Does the institution operate with integrity - meaning does it publicly state its policies which guide its operation (admission criteria, tuition and financial aid, description of programs and faculty and facilities, etc.)

Each regional accrediting agency approaches these five issues or questions a little differently, but all focus on some variation of these questions to form criteria and standards.

The process by which an institution is accredited, or re-accredited, is also pretty similar across the six regional accreditation associations. All require four steps:

1. A Self Study is generated by the institution being accredited or re-accredited. The Self Study focuses on the criteria and standards which flow from the five questions I mentioned before. An extended narrative, written with significant faculty participation, makes the case that the standards and criterion are satisfied. The Self Study also includes institutional data on students, faculty, programs, finances, student life programs, etc. And a host of public documents are included, ranging from catalogues to audited financial reports to admission brochures, among others.

2. The Self Study is sent to a team of evaluators assembled by the regional accrediting agency. These evaluators are generalists, trained to be able to focus on several areas of the institution, and knowledgeable, in general, of all parts of institutional operations. Each agency describes qualifications it seeks for evaluators on its web site. The web sites also identify how to apply for these positions, and how evaluators are trained and are themselves evaluated. Several other National Communications Association members serve on these teams currently. Once the team has

digested the Self Study material, it spends a few days on a visit to campus. I want to stress that in such a review the team makes an independent judgement about the institution's ability to meet the criterion or standards. The team views the Self Study as the institution's way of demonstrating it meets all requirements. But the team does more then verify that the Self Study is an accurate analysis of an institution. Instead of accepting the Self Study at face value, the team interviews representative faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and trustees to form its own opinion about whether the institution meets the standards and criteria. In effect this is the peer review process.

3. Then the team writes a report determining whether the institution satisfies the criterion or standards. It also notes any special strengths and weaknesses. The report goes to the regional accrediting agency and to the institution.

4. The institution may accept the report or appeal it. Accepting the report means the institution is in essential agreement with the findings and it is prepared to continue its programs and practices and policies. It also will agree to improve any weaknesses. If it chooses to appeal, a process for appeals exists in each regional agency. Disputes between the written team report and the institution are resolved by the process until a final decision is made by the Board of the Regional Accrediting Association.

So much, then, for how the process of accreditation or re-accreditation goes. Now some comments on assessment as part of this process.

It's no secret to all who work in American higher education, that assessment of student learning is now expected, as I mentioned earlier. Who expects it? For one, the public. The assessment movement - that's what it is, really - is traced back to the early 1980's by most observers. As an example in our discipline, Arnett and Arneson, writing in the May, 1997 issue of the Journal of the Association for Communication Administration, identify the publication A Nation At Risk in 1983 as the first major document calling attention to the need for assessment. The attention of the public continues even to the present, seen for instance in the 1994 "Goals 2000" report of the Clinton administration.

A second group expecting assessment is legislators. Stemming from an era of tight funding or funding reductions, at least 40 states now have some type of assessment requirements, according to a staff member of the North Central Association.

A third group is specialized program accrediting groups. I do not wish to steal thunder from my friends on the panel about communication related accrediting groups, so let me cite a recent example at my own institution, John Carroll University in Cleveland. Two weeks ago our Department of Education and Allied Studies was reviewed by NCATE, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. The standards of this agency are now accepted by the State of Ohio; that means that students who seek a license to teach elementary, middle grades or high school must meet NCATE standards. Beginning in 2000 NCATE (www.ncate.org) will require "evidence of assessments of

candidate performance" - that statement was the subject of much discussion in our Education Department during the visit.

So, what exactly does a regional accrediting association expect in an assessment program? Four sample components really - easy to spell out, but some not so easy to put into practice. Let me lay them out:

1. An institution needs to have a mission statement. The mission statement is the purpose for which the organization exists. Galvin, writing in a 1996 "Portfolio of the Consulting and Program Assessment Service" published by the old SCA, writes, the mission statement "embodies the vision and beliefs of the collective membership." I think she means a mission statement is the answer to the first question I raised earlier - what does the institution say it is doing or accomplishing for its publics and its students? Differing institutions, two year or four year, public or private, Carnegie I, II, III each will answer differently. The answer, is the mission. From my experience and reading, almost every institution has one. Periodically, mission statements need to be revisited as relevant conditions change.

2. The Departments within the institution need to have Goal statements. These are statements which join the department to the mission, showing how the department cooperates in the mission and carries it out. The term "join" means the department claims it is central to the institution's mission. Among others, Wartella wrote of this in May 1996 in the Journal of ACA describing how important this "joining" is.

This part is not easy to do. This is the hard part. It means a department must be able to demonstrate its contribution to the institution is direct and significant. The result of goal statements is accountability - a department must then show how it meets its goal. Arnette and Fritz comment on the factors which influence accountability in a diverse discipline like ours in a January, 1999, article in the Journal of ACA.

3. The courses given by a department have objectives which carry out the goal. These are specific statements for each course or group of courses which can be measured behaviorally, thus accountability is supported by documentation of some type.

4. The assessment must be continuous, with results used to change courses, or objectives, or goals as appropriate. Results should also be used by the academic administration to plan and to budget for programs and departments.

These four components (mission statement; departmental goals; course objectives; and program or system to measure results and the use of results in planning and budgeting) are the heart of an assessment program. It's not just mission - goals - objectives which we're all familiar with. It's the use of information and data to show what the department is doing in its courses that fits or is joined to the institution's mission.

Finally, let me close with some brief observations about the future of assessment. Or to respond to the hopes of some, will it go away; is it just another in a series of fads? The answer is clear - no it won't. Some brief evidence will support my claim. Recently, in

late Spring1999, the Pew Charitable Trust announced grants to two regional accrediting associations to support the emphasis on assessment and to develop new processes of accreditation.

To the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, operating in California, Hawaii and the Pacific territories, Pew gave $1.6 million. The Western Association explains its grant on its web site (www.wascweb.org/SENIOR/pew.htm) noting: "the Commission is committed to focusing our processes of accreditation more clearly on student learning and how well our institutions are evaluating their educational effectiveness."

To the North Central Association, operating in the Midwest, Pew funded, for a similar amount, a "Quality Improvement Project" to be in place by 2002 as an alternative process for accreditation. North Central's web site (www.ncacihe.org/AQIP/instinfo.htm) explains this will allow institutions with quality improvement programs to demonstrate they meet accreditation standards by "documenting their activity, investment, experience and success in improving academic quality." The most succinct statement on the future of assessment was made by Dr. Cecilia Lopez, Associate Commissioner of North Central Association, in an address on assessment in April, 1999. Speaking at the annual meeting Dr. Lopex said simply "assessment is not a fad and it will not go away." It won't, and it is essential for institutional accreditation or re-accreditation.